

PROBLEMS OF TRANSFORMATION OF AGRICULTURAL
SETTLEMENTS: THE CROFTING SETTLEMENTS OF
THE OUTER HEBRIDES, SCOTLAND

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In most of north-west Scotland, the islands of the Hebrides and of Orkney and Shetland, the predominant agricultural settlement unit is the croft, small-holdings rented at less than 50 /£ 120/ per annum, the vast majority of which are arranged in crofting townships, groups of from three to over one hundred crofts. Each croft consists of an area of arable and permanent pasture usually in a rectangular lot now fenced off from its neighbours: a majority of crofts may consist of more than one plot of land separated by other crofts, and almost all crofts have rights in common grazings shared by all crofts in the township: grazing rights /soutmings/ are usually expressed by the number of breeding cows, young cattle, ewes and other sheep which may be pastured by each tenant. In a few areas, there are also rights in common arable land. Figure I, the crofting township of Liniclett, Benbecula, illustrates the spatial layout of crofting.

Table I

	Number of Crofts /1970/ ¹	Working Units /1970/ ²	Acreage of Common Pastures /1963/ ³	Acreage of Crops and Grass /1963/ ³
Argyll				
Mainland	626	500	48,000	11,995
Islands	560	455		
Caithness	1,165	781	12,400	30,538
Inverness-shire				
Mainland	978	801	438,200	58,790
Islands	4,247	3,955		
Orkney	615	494	-	17,155
Ross and Cromarty				
Mainland	1,963	1,593	454,300	28,948
Island of Lewis	3,593	3,431		
Sutherland	1,963	1,511	259,000	14,903
Shetland	<u>2,805</u>	<u>2,019</u>	<u>182,000</u>	<u>15,181</u>
<u>Total</u>	<u>18,539</u>	<u>15,540</u>	<u>1,344,400</u>	<u>177,510</u>

Table I shows that there are some 19,000 registered crofts; Figure II brings out the distribution of the crofting population in 1951 apart from the Orkney and Shetland Islands: the basic distribution has not significantly changed since. Sixty-four per cent of the crofts are located on islands: the bulk of the remainder are distributed along the barren coastal peninsulas of the western and northern mainland coasts, and the others are located on the less attractive soils of the valley benches of the eastern river valleys and the upland cores among the restricted lowlands.

In the early nineteenth century, certain multiple-tenancy farms and farms held by tacksmen /leaseholders/ with sub-tenants were either let to single tenants or the arable land and some pasture was lotted in unenclosed small-holdings which shared the rough pasture of the former farms as common grazings; this was the origin of the crofting townships. As the remaining tacksmen's leases ended in the early 19th century, some of their farms were let to lowland sheep graziers and the sub-tenants were cleared from the farms. The better farms of the inland straths were cleared and some of the former sub-tenants were given lots round the coast where they would be able to fish; others were given lots on parts of the common pastures of the crofting townships, and many moved to the lowlands of Scotland or emigrated to North America and Australia and New Zealand.

Vigorous population growth in the North-west Highlands and Islands led to congestion on the small crofts, and the Crofters Act of 1886 gave all crofters security of tenure, the rights to bequeath their holdings and to receive compensation for improvements on renouncing their tenancy. In 1887, the Crofters Commission was formed: grazing regulations for common pastures were drawn up and fair rents determined. The above rights and the low level of rents have resulted in a rigid form of agrarian structure where there is no incentive to give up land even if the tenant is not using it. Attempts were made to relieve congestion by making more land available to crofters: the Royal Commission /Highlands and Islands/ of 1892 identified areas of land, usually farms, suitable for land settlement; over 2,600 new crofts were created and over 5,000 existing crofts enlarged between 1897 and 1939, adding over 47,000 acres /19,000 hectares/ of arable and over 630,000 acres /250,000 hectares/ of pasture to the crofting lands⁴. The original

Crofters Commission was merged with the Department of Agriculture for Scotland in 1913 but revived in 1955 after the Commission of Enquiry into Crofting Conditions of 1954 had reported. The main object of this paper is to examine the extent and mechanism of change in the Crofting area since 1955.

Between 1955 and 1959, the Crofters Commission had registered 19,800 crofts but, by 1970, this number declined to 18,539⁵. In 1963, the area under crofting tenure was estimated by the Commission to be 1,394,400 acres /560,000 hectares/, of which 9 per cent was in crops and grass, 21 per cent in rough grazings and 70 per cent in crofters' common grazings of which there were 751 in 1970⁶. The low percentage in crops and grass reflects the poverty of the Highland and Island environment for agriculture; areas of cultivable land are very limited in the Highlands and Islands and the crofters generally have the poorer land.

The number of registered crofts, however, is a less significant statistic than the number of working units: a working unit may be defined as all the land tenanted or sub-let and worked by one individual. Many crofters rent more than one croft, and their wives or sons may also be tenants of other crofts. Since 1965, the Crofters Commission have published statistics of working units and in 1970, 15,540 such units were identified⁷, although this is thought to be an over-estimate as it is based on separate agricultural returns made by crofters and does not take into account "informal" sub-letting.

These working units have been classified by the Crofters Commission in two ways. In 1966 they were classified according to acreage of crops and grass.

Table II

Working Units Classified According to Acreage in
Crops and Grass⁸

<u>Acreage of Crops and Grass</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>%</u>
None	479	3
Up to 5 acres /2.02/	6,847	46
Over 5 and up to 10 acres /4.05/	3,607	24
Over 10 and up to 20 acres /8.09/	2,162	15
Over 20 and up to 30 acres /12.14/	768	5
Over 30 acres /12.14/	1,077	7
	<u>14,940</u>	<u>100</u>

Table II shows that half of the working units have areas of crops and grass of less than 5 acres /2 hectares/ and that about three-quarters have areas of crops and grass of less than 10 acres /4 hectares/. Secondly, the Crofters Commission have classified the working units according to size measured in standard man-days required to work the holdings. In 1970, 86 per cent of the working units provided less than 100 days employment and only 3 per cent over 275 man days employment, that is, only 3 per cent are units requiring more than one man's fulltime attention and effort⁹.

Raw statistics such as those quoted above make it abundantly clear that the vast majority of crofts are uneconomic agricultural units. No overall statistics are available, however, of the degree to which the tenants of crofts depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Surveys in the Outer Hebrides by the Department of Geography, University of Glasgow, from 1956-1960, however,

indicate that, at that period, less than 12 per cent of the resident male population of working age /15-64/ were full-time crofters, that is crofters without any ancillary occupation, but a resurvey of the Uists in 1968 by the author on behalf of the Highlands and Islands Development Board indicated that the percentage of full-time crofters in Benbecula and North Uist had fallen considerably since 1956 and 1958 respectively: /see Table VII/.

Table III

Crofters by Age Groups and Ancillary Employment
1968 North Uist

	<u>15-19</u>	<u>20-29</u>	<u>30-44</u>	<u>45-64</u>	<u>65+</u>
Full-time Crofter	5	9	17	69	47
Crofter with Regular Employment	0	11	35	38	4
Crofter with Periodic Employment	2	9	16	17	2

Benbecula

Full-time Crofter	4	2	9	21	18
Crofter with Regular Employment	0	3	20	35	0
Crofter with Periodic Employment	0	0	7	10	17

It is evident from Table III that in the Uists at least, very few crofters are under 30 years of age. Overall statistics show that the average age of persons succeeding to tenancies of crofts from 1966-70 was 51 years of age¹⁰; this underlines the fact that the younger members of the crofting communities find it difficult to acquire crofts.

Thus tenancy as opposed to ownership, small size of agricultural units, and participation in full-time agriculture by middle-aged and elderly persons are three dominant characteristics of crofting agriculture.

Lack of manufacturing employment has led to a very selective migration of the younger members of families in search of training and England: in the seven Crofting Counties only 11 per cent of the working population are engaged in manufacturing employment as opposed to the Scottish average of 45 per cent. Further, with consistent migration, some tenancies are renounced and elderly tenants who are unable to work their crofts and whose families have migrated sub-let them formally or informally. Figure I shows the fragmented structure of holdings brought about by succession and sub-letting; it is rarely possible to group units in a consolidated fashion, as succession to tenancy and opportunity to obtain sub-lets is often by chance. The young, keen and able crofter who desires to work more land is often frustrated by simply being unable to obtain it.

The basic problem of the crofting system is that its rigid structure prevents maximum use of the land resources available. Since 1955, the Crofters Commission, in their remit to reorganise, develop, and regulate crofting have concentrated their efforts on encouraging the keen crofter to develop the potential of the available land. Their efforts can be grouped under five headings: reorganisation, apportionment of common land, pasture improvement, infrastructure development and encouragement of improved agricultural practice.

Reorganisation

In the Crofters Act of 1955, provision was made for reorganisation of townships where there were vacant crofts and scattered units or where the township was in "a state of disorganisation or decay", in order to create more economic units. The procedures are similar to those of

Remembrement Rural in France and similar provisions in other European countries aimed at consolidating fragmented farms, but have been little used by the crofting communities. Figure III shows one successful effort at Howbeg in South Uist which consolidated seven crofts from the original fifteen and lotted the common machair in six fixed lots from run-rig. Few similar schemes have been attempted: failure to achieve agreement among the tenants of the township is usually the reason for lack of reorganisation¹¹. In only ten crofting townships have reorganisation schemes, formal or informal, been carried out.

If reorganisation of townships has been abandoned, the Crofters Commission have been able to make land available to the active crofter in other ways. Firstly, absentee tenants, often resident in the cities, have been persuaded to renounce their tenancies. Since 1961, the average number of new cases of absenteeism per year has been 161, but in only eleven cases on average has the Commission had to issue an order terminating tenancies¹². These crofts have mostly been added to existing crofts.

Another method of enlarging a croft unit is to lease another croft. Before 1955, an absentee or elderly crofter sub-let his land to an active crofter on an informal basis. The lessee rarely invested any effort in such land as the let could be terminated at any time and much of the land sub-let deteriorated. In 1961, the Crofters Commission were empowered to register such sub-lets and, by 1970, 1,444 contracts of sub-let had been registered¹³, although it is known that "informal" sub-lets still persist. The 1955 Act also empowered the Commission to encourage the giving up of croft land by elderly crofters to make it available to their more active neighbours: elderly tenants may be granted a feu charter for a quarter acre /0.1 hectares/ of their land and their house but from 1965 to 1970, only 103 crofts, comprising 1,193 acres /483 hectares/¹⁴ were made available for the

enlargement of existing units in this way. This scheme is less attractive than sub-letting land as the crofter may pay more in feu duty than he formerly did in rent.

From crofters assigning or bequeathing their tenancies, or absentees or others renouncing tenancies, some 2,021 crofts have been enlarged and the area added to existing crofts has been 38,927 acres /15,750 hectares/.

Apportionment of Common Land

Figure IV illustrates an example of the apportionment of common land. The majority of the crofts in Sollas, North Uist, were laid out in 1899 in two pieces to take account of the different qualities of the land. The sandy machair land was worked in run-rig; up to six blocks of land, each of approximately six acres /2.4 hectares/ were annually cultivated in linear strips of half an acre /0.2 hectares/ for two to three years and then fallowed while other blocks were brought into cultivation.

Each time a block was brought into cultivation, lots were drawn for each strip; thus there was little incentive to improve the fertility of the machair blocks. In 1960, the cultivable part of the machair was lotted and each croft was allocated a consolidated block which was subsequently fenced. This process of apportionment has resulted in a greater intensification of cultivation on the machair; on one machair apportionment, 13 acres /5.3 hectares/ are now cultivated annually instead of the 3 acres /1.2 hectares/ under the run-rig system, and the grain crop, mixed oats and rye, is undersown with a grass mixture; the grass is ploughed in during the spring ploughing thus raising the humus content of the soil. Thus individualisation of former common arable has led to greater production. Common arable machair land

is virtually confined to the Southern Hebrides and there is a gradual movement to apportion these areas, held back in some townships by the older tenants being unwilling to depart from their traditional practices: agreement is required to enable apportionment to be carried out, and where older tenants are in the majority, this is not always forthcoming.

Pasture Improvement

Apportionment of parts of common grazings is more frequent, and, from 1955 to 1970, some 30,000 acres /12,000 hectares/ of former common land has been apportioned to individual crofters in the seven Crofting Counties¹⁵. Any crofter tenant may apply to the Crofters Commission for an apportionment of part of the grazing, but this has to be agreed by the other shareholders. Many of these apportionments are on an individual basis and are really an enlargement of crofts, but in Sollas /Fig. IV/, the whole township participated and the apportionments were allocated as far as possible to be near to the "parent" crofts. After fencing, the apportionments are dressed with shell sand from the beaches and artificial fertilizers, and grass mixtures developed by the North of Scotland College of Agriculture are scattered on the surface, resulting in significant pasture improvement. Financial assistance is available for such schemes and between 1956 and 1970 some 36,000 acres have been improved by surface seeding, some 27,000 acres /10,900 hectares/ by individual crofters and some 9,000 acres /3,600 hectares/ by township schemes. Individual apportionments have been much more successful than township schemes where whole townships have improved large areas: for, after the initial improvement has been made, there may be unwillingness on the part of some members of the township to contribute financially to the application of fertilizer necessary for the maintenance of the improved areas.

In some areas, land reclamation of apportionments of hill pastures has also been carried out where ploughing has been necessary before reseeding, and a higher grant is available in these cases.

Extension of working units by apportionments of common land has not only enabled enthusiastic crofters to increase their livestock numbers but the improved grassland has raised the quality of the stock, and reduced the age of the stock at sale. This is particularly evident in sheep management: the traditional practice was to graze wethers on the common pastures for three years before they were large enough to sell, and a 50 per cent death rate was quite common during this period, given the dangers of the terrain. Now the wether lambs are fed on the reseeded pastures from April to October and sold for prices equivalent to or higher than those obtained for three-year old wethers traditionally raised.

Infrastructure Development

Over 2.9M /£ 7.0M/ has been paid out in improvement grants between 1955 and 1970, 53 per cent for fencing /enclosure/ of crofts and apportionments, 22 per cent for land improvement. A further 12 per cent has been paid to improve amenities /roads, water supplies and cattle grids /since 1965 only/, 8 per cent for drainage improvements, and 5 per cent on farm equipment /pit silos, cattle shelters, fanks and dippers and electrical equipment/¹⁶.

Improved Agricultural Practice

Apart from these efforts to increase the size of units and improve the pastures and infrastructure, a more general improvement in arable agricultural practice has been achieved by making award of full agricultural subsidies conditional on one-third of the area cropped in any year being undersown with grass. In 1970, 19,740 acres /8,000 hectares/ of tillage and

19,920 acres /8,000 hectares/ of grass qualified for these grants and some 3,757 claims were paid. Headage payments based on livestock numbers benefit some 3,000 other crofters¹⁷.

These figures suggest that under 7,000 out of some 15,000 working units actually claim agricultural subsidies and one can draw the conclusion that less than 7,000 crofters are really active.

The Effects of Efforts to Transform Crofting Agriculture

From detailed studies of Benbecula and North Uist, the following data illustrate the type of changes that have taken place since 1955.

Table IV

Breeding Cows per Working Unit /figures are in percentages/

<u>Number of Breeding Cows</u>	<u>North Uist</u>		<u>Benbecula</u>	
	<u>1957-9</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1956</u>	<u>1968</u>
1	30	26	15	20
2	34	20	38	15
3	15	12	14	18
4	8	6	14	15
5	6	6	13	11
6 and over	7	30	6	21
Maximum number of breeding cows	20	30	9	16
Units with sheep only /number/	33	36	21	29
Total Units	351	297	171	150

Table V

Stock Numbers

Benbecula /Crofts/

	<u>Breeding Cows</u>	<u>Total Cattle</u>	<u>Ewes</u>	<u>Total Sheep</u>
1956	430	1,148	4,362	7,545
1968	678	1,930	3,631	7,135

The number of breeding cows are the most significant index to change in the level of agriculture as most of the cash income is earned from sales of calves and store cattle: there is a smaller element of income from the sale of wool and wedder lambs. From Table IV, it is clear that since 1956-9 there has been an increase in the cattle stocks held by the more intensive working units: in 1956, only 6 per cent of these units had at least 6 breeding cows: by 1968, 20 per cent of the units had 6 or more. Table V shows that the total number of breeding cattle in Benbecula had increased by almost 70 per cent from 1956 to 1968, in spite of the fact that the number of working units had decreased by some 12 per cent during this period.

Reference to data from individual townships given in Table VI makes it possible to attempt to estimate the influence of the various measures to develop crofting adopted by the Crofters Commission.

In Howbeg /Fig. III/, the reorganisation scheme has enabled cattle stocks to be increased: as little reseedling has taken place, the structural change has probable been significant.

Table VI

Changes in Agriculture in Selected Townships

		Breeding			Total		Resident
		<u>Units</u>	<u>Cows</u>	<u>Cattle</u>	<u>Ewes</u>	<u>Sheep</u>	<u>Population</u>
Howbeg	1957	7	20	44	150	131	21
/South Uist/	1968	6	23	72	121	219	18
Locheeport	1960	23	35	83	530	1,783	67
/North Uist/	1968	22	23	est.54	667	2,243	est. 51
Sollas	1955	9	40	est.135	est.150	476	60
/North Uist/	1958	9	63	204	237	630	54
	1964	9	70	228	300	750	48
	1968	8	84	277	400	est.1,000	49

Locheeport is one of the townships situated on the east coast of North Uist: pockets of stony drift constitute the agricultural land and there is none of the more easily worked, level, sandy machair land which girdles the west coast of the Southern Hebrides. The population is ageing rapidly and there has been little or no reseeding carried out. The sheep stock has increased - this is the one method of increasing income without much effort for crofters' sheep are normally infrequently tended. The age structure in this township and the low potential of the croft land are such that there is little incentive to take advantage of the schemes of the Crofters Commission.

Sollas, on the other hand, illustrates what progress can be made: since 1955 both cattle and sheep stocks have doubled. Here both structural changes, shown on Fig. IV in the form of apportionment of common land, and pasture improvement have formed the basis of progress. Individual

crofters have fenced their crofts and apportionments: one cattle shelter has been built and the township have taken advantage of grants to improve one township road and to build a fank where stock could more easily be loaded into lorries. But there is another more significant factor - the aid of the Advisory Service of the North of Scotland College of Agriculture which provides free help and advice to farmers and crofters alike. It was College Adviser, the late Donald Seaton, who encouraged the Sollas crofters to apply for apportionments and to improve the pastures; he also bought, on behalf of the keener crofters, breeding cows and rams from the Scottish mainland to improve the cattle and sheep stocks. It must also be said that the crofters of Sollas are keen agriculturalists and enterprising men and three of them are under 35 years of age.

Although there are difficulties in assigning credit to the various schemes in developing crofting agriculture, their impact has been to afford the 7,000 crofters who take advantage of the schemes a chance to improve if not to transform their holdings although the present legal framework of crofting does not permit radical changes to be made.

Table VII

Occupation Classes of Men /15-64/
/figures are in percentages/

	<u>North Uist</u>		<u>Benbecula</u>	
	<u>1958</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1956</u>	<u>1968</u>
Full-time Crofters	34	24	22	16
Crofters with Regular Employment	22	20	34	25
Crofters with Periodic Employment	21	11	17	7
Non-Crofting	<u>23</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>52</u>
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

It is difficult to estimate the effect of lack of opportunity for radical changes, but as Table VII shows, an increasing number of the men in Benbecula and North Uist are abandoning crofting, even on a part-time basis, as a source of a livelihood.

New Proposals for the Transformation of Crofting Agriculture

It has been recognised for a number of years that transformation of these crofting communities was not being radically achieved by the Crofters Acts of 1955 and 1961. While it is true that croft units have been enlarged by the addition of some 39,000 acres /15,750 hectares/ from crofts given up, some 30,000 acres /12,000 hectares/ of land have been added to crofts by apportionements from common land, some 36,000 /14,500 hectares/ of pasture have been improved and in spite of improved agricultural techniques, crofting continues its overall decline basically because of the unsatisfactory agricultural structure where land is not always available to the keen crofter wishing to expand.

In 1968 and 1969¹⁸ the Crofters Commission made certain significant proposals to the Secretary of State for Scotland which could radically transform crofting agriculture and rural settlement patterns designed "to give crofters incentives to accept changes in land use where these are necessary and to engage themselves in non-agricultural developments on their holdings". These new proposals are designed to replace crofter tenancy by owner-occupancy by the device of continuing to pay the rent as an annuity for a period to be agreed, and to transfer ownership of the common grazings to the township to be held in trust and administered by the Grazings Committee.

Owner-occupancy would enable crofters to develop their land for purposes other than agriculture, for example tourist development, to build additional houses for their married sons and daughters on their crofts and to borrow capital for development on the security of their holdings. The Common Grazing Committees could also develop or rent, to a developer, the assets of the hill land for caravan or camping sites and lease sporting rights, such as brown trout fishing, thereby gaining additional income for their communities. At present, none of these developments are possible; landlords can and do prevent non-agricultural developments and crofters can only claim compensation for agricultural improvements if they leave their crofts. Under the new proposals, as owner-occupiers, crofters could also dispose of their lands and houses at much more favourable terms. It is feared, however, that many holdings might be disposed of as summer cottages for urban dwellers: the Commission point out that the 1967 Agricultural Act makes provision for the establishment of Rural Development Boards to meet such problems and the Highlands and Islands Development Board can be authorised to exercise such functions and even, for example, acquire land in danger of going out of agricultural use to effect "amalgamation and reshaping of agricultural units".

These proposals recognise the fact that there is insufficient croft land to establish or maintain a satisfactory agricultural structure, and that there are an increasing number of persons in crofting areas who no longer wish to cultivate the land. If owner-occupancy was implemented, the rigid agrarian structure would be dissolved and crofting could begin to evolve.

Conclusion

The basic problem of crofting is that much of the land is tenanted by persons no longer active in agriculture, and that the younger, active crofter finds it difficult or impossible to acquire a sufficiently large agricultural unit. The efforts of the Crofters Commission since 1955 have allowed limited expansion by land apportionements but the implementation of the proposals for owner-occupancy would encourage those no longer wishing to work the land to dispose of their holdings, thus creating a pool of land for the expansion of working units. The improvements in crops, stock and pastures achieved in the last fifteen years would continue and probably increase under owner-occupancy.

The other basic problem of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland is the lack of manufacturing employment. For two hundred years no attempt to develop stable manufacturing employment has succeeded. At present most of the non-crofting employment is in the tertiary sector and the working population of Benbecula and North Uist have demonstrated over the past fifteen years a desire for employment alternative to crofting. The provision of manufacturing or processing employment has proved difficult, but until it is developed, the evolution of a more balanced community seems unlikely.

R e f e r e n c e s

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- 2 Ibid, Appendix II, p. 30.
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the Highlands and Islands, 1964, p. 75.
- 4 Turnock, D. Patterns of Highland Development, 1970, p. 70.
- 5 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1970, 1971, p. 5.
- 6 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1963, p. 7.
- 7 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1970, 1971, p.30.
- 8 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1966, 1967,
Appendix III, p. 31.
- 9 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1970, 1971,
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- 10 Ibid, p. 6.
- 11 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1955-6, Appendix
IV, Reorganisation Procedure, pp. 28-19.
- 12 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1970, 1971, p.6.
- 13 Ibid, p. 7.
- 14 Ibid, p. 7.
- 15 The Crofters Commission, Annual Reports, 1955-6 to 1970.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The Crofters Commission, Annual Report for 1970, 1971,
p. 9 and Appendices IV to VI, pp. 32-34.
- 18 The Crofters Commission, Annual Reports for 1968 and 1969.